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SIPDIS

SENSITIVE

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E.O. 12958: N/A

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SUBJECT: THE REMAKING OF "AL-IRAQIYYA" - PRIMITIVE BUT
EFFECTIVE PROGRAMMING

REF: Baghdad 00928

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accordingly.

¶1. Summary: After almost two years of confusion, several hundred million dollars in investment, chaotic management, and Byzantine internal machinations, "Al-Iraqiyya" -- the television component of the Iraqi Media Network (IMN) -- shows signs of finding its voice and projecting a populist "Iraqi" message, even as technical capabilities deteriorate. The network has gained credibility and impact (and audience share; it is now the leading broadcaster in the country) through its perceived "Iraqi-ization" following the April completion of a support contract by the U.S.-based Harris Corporation. Nonetheless, it continues to face serious hurdles in management, personnel training, and program production. The Embassy is supporting efforts within the ITG to enhance Al-Iraqiyya's long-term viability and capability by addressing structural and legal shortcomings with the IMN Board of Governors, and is engaging -- largely through USAID resources -- on selected program, training, and other areas of support. End Summary.

ON THEIR OWN

¶2. By all accounts, "Al-Iraqiyya" continues to suffer severe administrative problems, and on a regular basis disgruntled Iraqi employees engage American interlocutors seeking assistance and "intervention." There are serious questions about the capabilities and "agenda" of Director General Habib Al-Sadr (related by marriage to SCIRI leader Abdul Aziz Hakim), as well as concerns about the "autonomy" of the (supposedly independent) Board of Governors. Like many Iraqi institutions, financial resources, training opportunities, and authority are centralized, and regional affiliates are often left to fend for themselves.

¶3. Nonetheless, since the completion of the Harris contract just over two months ago, an element of resentment which had existed on the part of some towards what was considered outside influence has disappeared. Funded now entirely by Iraqi Government funds -- and by all indications none too generously -- the station's image has changed from one with high production values but considerable foreign programming (Lebanese soap operas and game shows, American documentaries, etc.) to an "Iraqi" broadcaster -- warts and all. The emphasis is now on inexpensive, local programming -- "talking head" public policy programs, "reality TV," and the like.

¶4. Unlike its main rival -- the upscale broadcaster "Al-Sharqiyya," which appeals to a more cosmopolitan viewer -- "Al-Iraqiyya" carries programming that ranges from the pedestrian (live sessions of the Iraqi Transitional National Assembly), to the provocative (such as its most popular program, "Terrorists in the Hands of Justice," which puts alleged malefactors on camera for a grilling by an off-camera Iraqi security officer; see reftel). The common denominator is Iraq-centrism. "Al-Iraqiyya" also carries a prime time weekly economic reform talk show (funded by PA Baghdad, through a local NGO) called "Iqtisaduna," and a wide spectrum of inexpensive, "man-in-the-street," phone-in and talk shows. Graphic, patriotic spots with up-tempo music promoting the Iraqi security forces, ads calling on citizens to report terrorists' activities, explanations of the electricity shortage, and the promotion of Iraqi democracy are ubiquitous. "Al-Iraqiyya's" frequent paid public service announcements promoting Iraqi confidence and pride -- produced by outside organizations -- are the broadcasters most professional programming.

MEN OF THE WOLF LEAD THE WAY

¶5. One of the most effective local spots is a music video

produced by the Iraqi Ministry of Interior (MoI) which precedes the top rated "Terrorists" show. Set to traditional Iraqi tribal music and called "Men of the Wolf" (MoI's Wolf Brigade produces the "Terrorists" program), it juxtaposes Iraqi troops training, shooting, dancing, praying -- a red-tabbed Iraqi general gently opens and kisses a Our'an -- with the destruction caused by terrorists, included damaged mosques and churches, burning oil pipes and wounded women and children. It is quite an effective piece of agitprop.

¶16. In addition to consistently carrying TNA sessions and press conferences by Iraqi officials, the station churns out locally-produced music videos praising Iraq and its security forces. On Friday, viewers are treated to both ends of the new Iraq's socio-ideological spectrum: in the morning a religious program offers a unique form of "Sunni outreach," with a call-in show featuring four anti-insurgency but very conservative salafi Sunni Arab shaykhs, while in the afternoon the program "Hawazir" features an attractive Iraqi woman conducting random interviews in markets, street corners and shops; she approaches total strangers (mostly men), makes small talk with them, and asks them a question which, if they answer correctly, allows them to select a prize.

STILL A DIFFICULT WAY FORWARD

¶17. All recent polling and anecdotal evidence continues to show "Al-Iraqiyya" as, currently, the most popular station nationwide. This is no small accomplishment considering that Iraqis now have at least 22 local stations plus -- with a boom in once-forbidden satellite dishes -- a plethora of regional Arab networks to choose from. The station's production values compare poorly with many of its competitors, but it offers something they do not (or do not wish to): undiluted positive messaging and an image of normalcy and self-confidence for the Iraqi people.

¶18. The ITG has been sensitized to the need to bring "Al-Iraqiyya's" Board of Governors to full strength and get the new Board approved by the Transitional National Assembly. Habib Al-Sadr, an Allawi appointee with family ties to SCIRI leader Al-Hakim, is under close scrutiny from sectors within the ITG who would like to see him replaced with a Shi'a Islamist figure (such as Jawad Talib, Prime Minister Ja'afari's media advisor and, prior to 2003, Ja'afari's representative in Tehran).

¶19. Comment: The key to "Al-Iraqiyya's" continued effectiveness and sustainability will be its ability to create an effective and efficient management structure, including addressing serious personnel issues (especially staff training and retention), lack of production capability, and dysfunctional administrative practices. Embassy Baghdad, both PA and USAID, are engaged in an intensive dialogue with the ITG and IMN on how the USG can assist "Al-Iraqiyya" in addressing these urgent needs.

¶110. Ultimately, a competitive media environment, such as exists in Iraq, requires excellence for success. But in the Iraq of today, "Al-Iraqiyya" -- with its simple but targeted messaging and homespun credibility -- is currently enjoying a stay at the top of the competitive media heap. End Comment.

SATTERFIELD